

The Unveiling of the Cenotaph and the Interment of the Unknown Warrior

By Colin Dean

Two years following the commemorations of the centenary of the armistice we have reached the milestone which perhaps draws the first world war centenaries to a close, as we recall the unveiling of the Cenotaph in Whitehall and the interment of the Unknown Warrior who lies in the Collegiate Church of St. Peter at Westminster.

The Victory March, or Peace March, to mark the end of the Great War was held on 19th July 1919 and what was intended to be a temporary Cenotaph was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and constructed from wood and plaster in Whitehall to act as the focal point for the nation's homage. This struck a huge chord with the nation and overwhelming public demand led to the Cenotaph being made into a permanent structure of Portland stone.

The body of the Unknown Warrior was chosen to represent all those who fell during the Great War and was brought across the Channel from France in a destroyer, HMS *Verdun*, on Wednesday 10th November 1920, being accorded the honours due to a field marshal.

The *Verdun* arrived at Admiralty Pier at Dover soon after 3.00 pm to a field marshal's salute of 19 guns fired from Dover Castle. Awaiting its arrival was a guard of honour found by 2nd Battalion The Royal Irish Fusiliers (Princess Victoria's) with the band under its bandmaster, Mr. L.P. Bradley, but the music played was not a funeral march as might have been expected. Instead, the Unknown Warrior was brought home to the triumphant strains of Elgar's *Land of Hope and Glory* although reports differ as to whether this was played as the *Verdun* drew alongside or as the bearer party approached the gangway. Bandmaster Bradley later recounted that Chopin's Funeral March had originally been suggested but that he had felt something more martial was required and had therefore sought the approval of his commanding officer for Elgar's music to be played.

The coffin was taken to Dover station where guards of honour from 2nd Battalion The Connaught Rangers and The Duke of York's Royal Military School awaited, and placed in a carriage, the train leaving Dover at 5.50pm.

In the words from the orders for the ceremony:

'The Coffin will be brought in a special saloon carriage to the South Eastern and Chatham Railway Company at Victoria where it will arrive at 20.32 hours on the evening of Wednesday November 10th.

The saloon carriage will then be brought round to No. 8 Platform of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway Company's Station at Victoria. Here it will be placed under guard with double sentry, to be furnished by 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards. The guard will consist of 4 NCOs and 12 Guardsmen and therefore contain 6 reliefs. The 2 sentries will rest on their arms reversed and will be relieved every half hour.'

In recent times a commemorative plaque was placed by Platform 8 but unfortunately the wrong one, as in 1920 there were two Victoria stations owned by different railway companies and each with a Platform 8. The correct one was at the station on the western side, presumably now numbered Platform 16 after the stations were combined, but perhaps you could reasonably argue that there is symbolism in 'Platform 8'.

Returning to the printed orders:

'A Funeral Procession will be formed at Victoria Station on the morning of November 11th and will conduct the Coffin in slow time by way of Grosvenor Gardens, Grosvenor Place, Wellington Arch, Constitution Hill, The Mall, Admiralty Arch, Charing Cross to the Cenotaph in Whitehall. Length of route - 3,960 yards (2¼ miles).

The Procession will be formed by:

- 1. Firing Party - 1 Serjeant, 1 Corporal and 12 Guardsmen of 3rd Battalion Coldstream Guards.*
- 2. Gun Carriage with a team of 6 horses, together with 3 Limber Gunners on foot, will be furnished by "N" Battery Royal Horse Artillery.*
- 3. Bearers - 1 Serjeant and 8 Guardsmen of 3rd Battalion Coldstream Guards.*
- 4. Pall Bearers - 12 Distinguished Officers of the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force.*
- 5. The Massed Bands, Pipes and Drums. The Band and Drums of the Coldstream, Scots, Irish and Welsh Guards, the Pipes of the Scots Guards - total of 4 Officers and 209 other ranks including 1 Director of Music and 1 Serjeant Drummer* of each of the 4 regiments.*
- 6. The Mourners
Royal Navy - 76 Officers, 150 other ranks
Army - 174 Officers, 307 other ranks
Royal Air Force - 31 Officers, 60 other ranks*
- 7. Representatives of various ex-servicemen's organisations - 400 in total.*

A steel helmet and side arms will be placed on the Coffin.

The Gun Carriage will be drawn up on the west side of the Carriage Road opposite the Railway Station and facing Eccleston Bridge. The Massed Bands, Pipes and Drums will be formed in 4 ranks on each side of the Carriage Road facing inwards, the southern flanks (Band of the Coldstream Guards) being 10 yards north and clear of Eccleston Bridge.

The Mourners of the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force will be drawn up in three ranks on each side of the Carriage Road facing inwards. The Royal Air Force will be next to the Massed Bands (Band of the Welsh Guards) and the Royal Navy nearest the exit into Buckingham Palace Road. The ex-servicemen will be drawn up in fours in the centre of the Carriage Road, the head of the column south of the Gun Carriage, facing north. The Massed Bands will arrive at the Station entrance at 09.15 hours.

The Bearers will carry the Coffin from the Railway Station and secure it on the Gun Carriage.

At 09.40 the Firing Party, having reversed arms and turned to its right, will move off in slow time, the Massed Bands commencing to play. At the same time, "N" (St. John's Wood) Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, will commence firing 19 minute guns in Hyde Park.

As the Firing Party reaches the Massed Bands these will turn towards it. The 4 ranks on each side of the Carriage Road will step off, wheeling inwards, so that the Massed Bands follow the Firing Party 8 abreast. Bands or Pipes and Drums will play continuously throughout the march. The Gun Carriage, escorted by the Pall Bearers, will march next in rear of the Massed Bands.

As the Coffin passes between the Mourners, the Officers only will salute. The Mourners of the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force will, when the Firing Party, Massed Bands and Gun Carriage have passed between their ranks, turn in the same direction (i.e. towards the station exit) and follow the Gun Carriage. The ex-Servicemen will follow in fours.'



[The Massed Bands entering Whitehall from Trafalgar Square](#)

The massed bands stepped off from Victoria playing Chopin's Funeral March and as they approached the Cenotaph, which was draped with huge union flags, they passed to the east side and marched on as far as King Charles Street, counter-marched and halted facing the Cenotaph from the south. The gun carriage halted opposite the point where His Majesty King George V was standing. One Serjeant Drummer* and 8 Drummers of the Brigade of Guards took post on the east side of Whitehall facing the Cenotaph and two choirs were in position on either side of the entrance to the Home Office.

A short service commenced at 10.50 am with the hymn *O God Our Help in Ages Past*, after which the Archbishop of Canterbury led the Lord's Prayer. As 'Big Ben' struck the hour of 11 o'clock The King unveiled the Cenotaph and two minutes' silence was observed, commencing with the last strike of the hour. At the end of the silence *Last Post* was sounded by the Guards Drummers, and The King and the distinguished guests placed wreaths on the Cenotaph.



The Massed Bands, seen on the left of the photograph, in position at the Cenotaph towards the end of the service.
The Firing Party is in front of the band; the Gun Carriage is on the extreme right of the picture

The service over, the massed bands counter-marched and, led by the firing party, marched along Parliament Street via the north and west sides of Parliament Square towards the North Door of Westminster Abbey. Behind the bands walked the Archbishop of Canterbury and the heads of various religious denominations, then came the gun carriage, behind which marched The King and Royal Princes, followed by the Mourners.

The firing party passed through the gate in the iron railings and marched towards the Abbey's North Door, opening out to 6 paces between ranks, halting and turning inwards to rest on their arms reversed. The massed bands had continued along Broad Sanctuary, countermarched and halted.



The Massed Bands in Broad Sanctuary as the coffin of the Unknown Warrior is removed from the Gun Carriage to be carried into Westminster Abbey

The bearer party carried the coffin from Broad Sanctuary into the Abbey between the ranks of the firing party and through two lines of holders of the Victoria Cross, wearing either service dress or civilian clothing and, at the King's request, they were sized irrespective of rank.

The service in Westminster Abbey had begun earlier with the Band and Drums of the Grenadier Guards on duty inside, the band being placed immediately west of the organ loft on the south side of the Nave, under the direction of Captain Albert Williams, MVO, Mus.Doc, Senior Director of Music, Brigade of Guards. They began playing at 10 o'clock with the following programme:

Overture: In Memoriam	<i>Sir Arthur Sullivan</i>
Marche Funebre et Chant Seraphique	<i>Alexandre Guilmant</i>
Morceau Symphonique - Redemption	<i>Cesar Franck</i>
Slow Movement from Symphony – 'Killed in Action'	<i>Arthur Somervell</i>

At 10.45 am the choir and clergy moved from the Nave to the High Altar, while singing *The Supreme Sacrifice (O Valiant Hearts)* and *O God Our Help in Ages Past*, and after a short service the choir moved to the North Porch singing *Brief Life is Here Our Portion*, as sound of Chopin's Funeral March from the massed bands drew closer from outside.

After the coffin arrived the 'Sentences' *I am the Resurrection and the Life* from the burial service, were sung to the music of Croft and Purcell as the procession moved from the North Porch to the graveside in the centre of the Nave.

The Grenadier Guards played Beethoven's *Equale for Trombones* before the short service which included the hymn *The Lord's My Shepherd*, and then *Lead Kindly Light* as the Unknown Warrior was laid to rest. The Lord's Prayer was followed by the singing of *Abide with Me* and Rudyard Kipling's *Recessional*, after which a roll of drums reverberated around the historic walls of the Abbey and buglers sounded *Reveille* from the steps west of Henry VII Chapel at the conclusion of the service.

The outgoing voluntary was *Grand Solemn March*, which had been composed by Major George John Miller of the Royal Marine Light Infantry, Portsmouth Division, for the funeral of HRH Prince Henry of Battenburg in 1896. The composer's son (of the same name) was to succeed Captain Williams as Director of Music, Grenadier Guards, in the following year. Major Miller's voluntary brought the interment service to a close just as, one hundred years later, remembrance of that event brings our sequence of first world war centenaries to a close too.

*The title Serjeant Drummer was used from 1881 until 31st July 1928 when the historic title of Drum Major was sensibly restored.